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ABSTRACT

Where English as a Second Language is taught as part of the regular school curriculum, student motivation may be limited. One solution is to encourage involvement in learning by having students write their own tests. For classroom tests used in formative evaluation, this approach can be applied to both group and individual work. A unit from an Israeli textbook and a unit on a short story illustrate the method. After reading the text and completing the accompanying exercises, the teacher reviews the unit with the class. The students' task is to discover what new material the unit contains and how it is presented and practiced, working in small groups. The groups are asked to choose what they think should be tested, and to write the test and answer key using the guidelines provided. The teacher corrects the tests. If the exercise is used primarily for teaching, the tests can then be administered and corrected by the working groups. If the tests are used for grading, the teacher extracts the items to be included in the actual assessment. Where group work is not feasible, the same process may be followed with individuals. A similar procedure applies to writing tests for literary texts. (MSE)

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LET YOUR STUDENTS WRITE THEIR OWN TESTS

Kari Smith

Presented at the 1990 Meeting of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language Conference in Dublin, Ireland

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LET YOUR STUDENTS WRITE THEIR OWN TESTS

Kari Smith

In countries where English is taught as a foreign language (Europe, The Middle East, The Far East etc.) as part of the school-curriculum, most students are aware of their need to know English well, and therefore their motivation is often instrumental. However,the students do usually not have a present need to know the language (which is often found in a second language setting where the motivation might be of a more integrative nature) (Schuman;1975, Naiman and others;1978, Gardner;1980),but a future need which might sometimes seem to be of little relevance at the present. As a result many teachers working in the above mentioned setting have to face the problem of lack of motivation found in their students.

A possible means to diminish the problem is to work according to the lines of a teaching approach of a more humanistic nature which puts emphasis on the learner's involvement in the learning process and also leaves a great part of the responsibility of the learning to the learner him/herself.The more active the learner is in taking initiative, the better learner s/he becomes (Knowles;1975). The students might be asked to be partners in the planning stage of the course, as their interests, needs and learning styles are taken into consideration. Furthermore, they should be involved in the ongoing process of a formative course-evaluation, during which they also rewrite and adapt the learning-material; working under the guidance of and together with the teacher on this.Clarke (1989) makes the claim that working according to such principles "would produce, quite simply, better motivated learners and thus better results" (p.134). He has developed five principles of adaptation in which he believes the learner can be involved (Clarke;1989,p.135): He advocates the importance of the learners becoming aquainted with the learning material from the "inside' by having them create their own learning material, and teaching them to become the "knower' of specific parts of the material. It is also suggested that the learners become evaluators and assessors, and this

principle leads us to the main topic of this paper; which discusses how the learners may become writers of the evaluation means (such as tests) as well as the assessors of their own learning process and its outcome. For the learners to be ready to take on such a heavy part of the responsibility of what is going on in the classrooms, they must be properly trained (Clarke;1989), and there must be clearly stated objectives for the course(Dickinson;1987). These objectives may, if the teaching situation permits, be decided on together with the learners.

Before the idea of letting your students write their own tests is pursued, some underlying principles must be clarified:

1. The type of tests dealt with in this paper is classroom tests, and the ideas do not easily lend themselves to external tests.

2.Classroom tests are viewed as a teaching means and not only as a tool for evaluation. The tests are used as teaching material before and after the test.

3.The tests are mainly used for formative evaluation rather than for summative evaluation; the aim is to improve rather than to prove (Shohamy;1989).

The tests might be used for summative evaluation if they are given at the end of a unit or at the end of the year when no external exam is required.

4.The learners evaluate their own performance on the tests.(But this does not mean that the teacher does not evaluate and grade the tests.) 1*

Two types of classroom settings will be discussed; group work and individual work, each of which having its advantages and disadvantages. The setting chosen by the individual teacher depends on the aim of the activity as well as on the characteristics of the class and the personality of the teacher. It is not recommended to try these ideas of groupwork in a class that has never practiced this setting before. Furthermore, it is the intention to relate the approach to two different components of language teaching;a) the teaching according to a textbook divided into various units; each unit including presentation of

1* This principle will be dealt with in another paper.

new vocabulary, a new structure, and practice of the various language skills. An example of such a unit will be given. b)The suggestions also relate to the teaching and testing of literature; working on facts, interpretation and evaluation of a short-story together with using it as a text for practising vocabulary and grammar. The short-story "A Summer's Reading" by Bernard Malamud serves as the text for this part. Hopefully the suggestions touch on most types of material used by foreign language teachers in their respective classrooms.

WRITING TESTS FOR A UNIT FROM A TEXTBOOK-IN GROUPS

The example unit is taken from an Israeli textbbok for the intermediate level (see appendix for further information) and it includes the following:

1. Reading texts introducing new vocabulary and the new structure; working on global and more specific reading.

2. Explanation and practice of a new structure (the passive). The structure is drilled and practised in various ways; recognition of the structure, filling in exercises, rewriting of sentences,free practice in oral and written work.

3.Vocabulary work such as a) synonyms; finding words in the passage with the closest meaning to the given word (expression). b)the odd man out. c)a guided cloze. d)matching words and expressions.

4.Listening text recorded on an audiocassette followed by true-false questions.

5.Writing;developing an idea. An example text is given.

6.Speaking;roleplay and groupwork.

The teacher has finished teaching the unit,and s/he wants to test the class to see if the material is properly learned.What is usually done is that the class is told that there will be a test in a few days, and they have to go home and study carefully for the exam. Those who are interested in a high grade will study well trying to guess what the teacher is going to include in the test. Those who are not very motivated usually approach the test hoping that they have already learned enough of it to pass. Finally, those who didn't learn the material in class, are not

capable of learning it by themselves before the exam, and in most cases the anxiety caused by the forthcoming exam makes the class rather difficult to handle, which often creates unwanted tension.

The following suggestions reduce the tension, see to that the material is carefully reviewed several times and retaught by the peers to those who did not understand it.It also reduces the workload for the teacher which is certainly not of minor importance.

First, the teacher analysis and reviews the unit with tne class. The students' task is to discover what new material the unit has, and how this material is presented, drilled and practised.This is done in groups of about five students, and if you have a heterogeneous class you should also have heterogeneous groups. With the right guidance, the groups come up with a list similar to the one above; disregarding the professional termonology. They are asked to write down examples of the various activities instead. Each group presents its analysis to the class, and while this is being done, the teacher organizes it on the blackboard or on an transparancy. When this is done, the unit has been carefully reviewed and discussed by the whole class. Points that are unclear have been explained within the groups by the students themselves or by the teacher as s/he is moving from group to group. There is still time for explanations during the groups'presentation of their analysis.

The next step is to ask the groups to choose what they think should be tested in this unit keeping in mind that the test should be an example of what has been taught. The groups are then asked to write the test, using the type of the tasks found in the unit, practicing the new language, but they shoud avoid an exact copy of the activities in the book.They are also told that a test should have an internal increase in the difficult level, so that the first task is easier than the last one. The material is once more being carefully discussed(in English, of course) and studied by the students, because in order to write similar activities at various difficult levels, the material must be understood and absorbed by the learners. The students know that some part of

their test will be included in the final test, and this motivates them to learn the material even more carefully.Being experienced testtakers, they are also aware of the importance of clear instructions and unambiguous tasks.

If the teacher wants to (and it ensures a third review of the unit) s/he can ask the groups to write an answer key to their tests wherever this is possible.

At this point (which has usually taken several lessons of serious learning) the teacher collects the groups' tests and corrects them at home. Now s/he can choose one of two approaches; it depends on how serious the test is meant to be. If we follow the idea of using the test mostly for a teaching purpose,the test written by one group is given to another group which might take it as a grouptest or individually. It is then being corrected by the writer group, and the grade is handed in to the teacher together with the corrected test for him/her to see how well the class did. It can be followed up by having the writer group go through the test together with the testee group providing the necessary explanations. The writer-group is now the knowers, but will be the learners when the test they took is being explained. The teacher acts as a source of refence when this is needed.

However, if a more serious test approach is taken, and the test is meant for grading as well, the teacher collects the tests which have been designed by the groups. At home s/he chooses what items should be included in the real test, and as this is done s/he sees to that each group contributes something to the test. The language is corrected wherever necessary, and the weight is given. But the teacher does not add any of his/her own ideas to the test which is a pure student product.The class is informed about the day the test will take place (usually in a week), so there is time for individual preparations for those who want to. This procedure has, however, ensured that all the learners have reviewed the material several times. The anxiety before the test is usually much lower because of this, and also the knowledge that one part of the test (they do not know which) has been designed by them makes their attitude towards the test

more positive. The motivation is also increased because of their personal involvement in the test-writing process. They realize that the test is not a monster created by the teacher in order to fail them, but a means for learning and reviewing the material at the same time as it provides information for them as learners and for the teacher about what has been learned. We know what has been taught, but we seldomly know what has been learned without testing.

WRITING TESTS FOR A UNIT FROM A TEXTBOOK-INDIVIDUAL WORK

In classes where groupwork is not feasable, the same approach might be used, but the work is done frontally and individually. Instead of analysing the unit in groups, the teacher can analyse it with the whole class together using a frontal setting, writing the students' ideas on the blackboard or using the overhead projector. The teacher's edited analysis is then copied by the learners or they get it on a handout to use at home. Their homework is then to write a test or part of a test if it seems to be too much for them to write out a whole test. Some of the students might be asked to concentrate on the vocabulary work, while others should concentrate on the reading part,or grammar, etc. The teacher just has to see to that all the parts s/he wants to include in the test have been covered. Sometimes it is advisable to do this work in class so the teacher can be of assistance to the learners while they are acting as test designers. The learner-written tests are then collected by the teacher who corrects and edits the class test by including something from each student's test. This is extremely important because each learner needs to find his/her own idea or sentence in the exam. The knowledge of being a contributor to the final test is what increases the pupils' motivation. This way of creating tests also ensures a careful preparation and review by all the learners which is an important factor in reducing test-anxiety.

This type of tests might be corrected by the teacher, by the learners or by both, and this will be discussed in another paper. What is of importance is, however, that the test is used as material for teaching while it is being returned.

WRITING TESTS FOR LITERATURE- IN GROUPS

Also while testing literature we have to keep in mind that we should test what we have taught, and in the same way the material was taught. A test should not have any unpleasant surprises that the students have not been prepared for. It is, however, more difficult to analyse the work done on a piece of literature because very often much of it is made up by the teacher or by the learners themselves and there is no textbook with activities to rely on. This makes it, however, more challenging for the teacher and the class.

While teaching a short-story, the following is considered the elementary work that needs to be done and therefore this paper concentrates on that. The story "A Summer's Reading" by Bernard Malamud has been taught to highschool students in a kibbutzschool in Israel over a period of three weeks, spending about three hours a week on it.

1. The facts of the story have been discussed with the pupils and activities including true-false questions,short answer questions have been used in order to ensure comprehension of the text: e.g.

"Where does George's sister work?" (Short answers)

"George was kicked out of school because of his low grades". (True/False)

2.The learners have been encouraged to interprete the story, using information provided in the text; e.g.

"What was George's way to escape from reality, and what does he want in life?'

3.Evaluation, expressing personal opinion is a must while working with literature in the foreign language classroom;e.g.

"If you were Sophie, how would you feel about George?"

4.The students are asked to use the message of the story in their own composition writing as a follow-up activity:e.g.

"George's life five years later".

"How can we help people like George on the kibbutz?"

5.Being language teachers, it is often difficult to resist the temptation of using the text for language work as well, and therefore cloze activities and grammar activities

related to the structure dealt with in the grammar lessons are also part of the work. (See the appendix).

Each student is asked to look through his/her notes on the story in order to gather information about it and how it was taught. With this information the learners form groups whose task it is to pool all the information about the story and to organize it for presentation to the class. Each group reports on the material collected, and the teacher organizes the information from the groups so it can be clearly presented to the students in form of a handout. This is, in fact, a summary of the work and activities carried out in relation to the story, which makes it attractive to most learners.

With this at hand the groups are asked to write a test which shall be an example of the work done in class and at home (it is all written on the handout).The aim is to use the same techniques and activities as those they are aquainted with, but the challenge of it is to word them differently and to find other aspects of the story worthwhile testing. While the groups are working on this, they are constantly encouraged to speak in English, and the learners review and analyse the story in groups for the third time. The first time was when it was taught in class; the second time while they collected all the work done on the story, and now the story is again being carefully worked on, but this time with a differnet task in mind. When the task has been completed , and each group has designed a test, the story is usually well known and understood by most of the learners. They realize that this approach saves them a lot of time spent on preparation at home, and they also study together for the exam which is usually a motivating factor. In addition to these fringe benefits, they have written a real test; parts of which will be used in the exam they are going to have. They have been given responsibility for testing themselves.

The procedure of writing up the classexam is similar to the one previously suggested; the teacher selects what to use as s/he ensures that each group has contributed something. Because of the

fact that the students do not know what will be used in the eaxam, the teacher will have to decide on the weight each test item is given, and this should be written on the exam paper. The test is then taken individually if the teacher wants to have information about each student's knowledge in order to give a grade. Is this of less importance, it is suggested that the test is taken in groups, and thus used more as a teaching device than as a tool for testing. What to do depends on the teacher's aim with the test. In any case it should be used as teaching material when it is returned to the learnes, and the test is not the end of the story.

WRITING TESTS FOR LITERATURE-INDIVIDUALLY

Working on a piece of literature is often a personal experience for the learners, and they do not always want to share their feelings with their peers. This might be more of a problem while working with adolescents than while working with adults. Therefore the individual work on the story and the test might be preferred by many learners (and teachers). If this is done, the teacher should brainstorm the class for suggestions about how the story was dealt with keeping a frontal set up instead of asking the class to work in groups. But before this is done, the students need time to look through their own notes, and this can easily be done at home. After the teacher has collected the information provided by the learners, s/he , as suggested above, organizes it on a handout to the learners who study it carefully at home as they choose what type of activities they prefer to work on while designing a test. It is too much work for one student to write out a whole test, and the teachers may, in heterogeneous classes, allot the tasks according to the learners' ability. The weakest students might be asked to make up the questions on the facts, while the more able learners are asked to write evaluation questions, etc. This way all the students have the possibility to participate in the test-designing process even though it is done individually without the benefit of the help of other groupmembers. The teacher must also ensure that each learner will contribute something to the final format of the test put together by the teacher. When the day of the test finally comes, most students are well prepared without having felt the

pressure of "studying for an exam". It is not said that there is no need for individual preparation before the exam, but this need is minimized as the pupils are familiar with the material and with the testtype.

Conclusion.

Based on the belief that more involved and responsible learners make better learners this paper has presented various suggestions of how to involve the learners in the testwriting process. The suggestions are related to classroom tests, mainly meant for formative testing. The approach might be used for work in groups and individually, and applied to testing units in the textbook or works of literature such as a short-story.

The suggestions ensure a thorough review of the material to be tested, as the learners analysis it carefully before they have to internalize it in order to make up testing items. Because the learners become so familiar with the material to be tested, their anxiety usually lessens,and their motivation increases because they know that the test is their own product, and they are responsible for it.The teacher has to guide the class carefully in how to write a test, emphasizing the fact that a test should be an example of what has been taught and done in class, and it should not include any unfamiliar tasks. The test-designing process becomes a valuable learning and teaching process as well.

However, the test has not lost its value as teaching material the moment it has been prepared and taken by the students. The correction and returning of the paper should be exploited by the teacher to reteach what has not been learned, and also to help the learners to evaluate themselves. This is, however, the topic for another paper.

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LET YOUR STUDENTS WRITE THEIR OWN TESTS

CLASS TESTS

UNIT FROM THE TEXTBOOK		LITERATURE	
GROUPS	INDIVIDUALS	GROUPS	INDIVIDUALS
analysis of unit	analysis of unit		analysis of work done
		comparing analysis	
teacher organizes	teacher organizes	teacher organizes	teacher organizes
writing of test	writing of test at home	writing of test	writing of test at home
teacher designs test/ gives weight	teacher designs test/ gives weight	teacher design test/ gives weight	teacher design test/ gives weight
tested	tested	tested	tested
correcting		correcting	
teaching/ learning		teaching/ learning	